

His typewriters talk any language



by CLIVE HOWARD

Given a few days, Martin Tytell, an ingenious young New Yorker, can take any machine apart and put it together again to write anything from Cree to Persian

worthy Indian and require a typewriter to record the bill of sale in authentic Cree, Tytell can solve your problem. By delving into his amazing stockpile of more than a million type faces, Tytell can convert the keyboard of any machine, portable or standard, into Cree in about two days.

Persian takes a little longer. Written like script, all letters must meet, and the position of a letter indicates its sound. Persian may also employ four characters with a single key. Dinka, a language spoken by more than a million natives in the Sudan, is astonishingly simple. But Arabic, Hindustani, Hebrew and Sanskrit, all written backward, call for the utmost in Ty-

ANYONE WHO HAS taken a screwdriver to a faulty typewriter has badly contemplated the result—confusion of small parts will be in high regard for the genius of Martin Tytell, who pulls typewriters apart and puts them back together so they will write in any one of 147 foreign languages, including Urdu, Dinka and Sanskrit. For instance, you plan to sell Manhattan Island back to some

tell's talents as a linguistic scientist.

Martin Tytell, a 34-year-old New Yorker, has built a polyglot mousetrap which attracts people from every corner of the earth. Although American manufacturers have long built machines in the most commonly spoken foreign languages, such as French, German, Spanish and Russian, Tytell is one of the few men specializing in converting new and used American machines into foreign languages.

His customers are professors, language students, foreign shipping lines, export companies, United Nations delegates and even Hollywood film companies interested in translating the word colossal into as many languages as there are countries with movie houses.

Tytell has made some remarkable change-overs. Some years ago, when he was asked to convert a typewriter to Persian, he located an instructor in Persian at an Eastern university who briefed him in the intricacies of the language.

Together they studied many Persian documents to determine the characters recurring most frequently so that those characters could be strategically located on the keyboard. Working with a hand file, Tytell reversed and altered slightly a letter from one language, turned sideways the punctuation mark of another, cut into still others, and in ten days had the Persian keyboard completed.

So unique is Tytell's type collection that while he was a staff sergeant converting for the Army's translation offices, it became a military necessity to return him to his own office. For one 90-day period, to keep secret the work of

converting machines into polyglot keyboards which wrote in 16 languages and were parachuted to OSS operatives in occupied countries, he was taken out of uniform.

TYTELL, WHO IS BLOND and is talking, got into the language business in 1937, when a New York department store wanted a Burmese typewriter for a valuable client. Working with type faces and the copy of a Burmese keyboard provided by a manufacturer, Tytell filled the order in five days. Soon he was filling orders for machines in Malay, Urdu—even phonetic Japanese.

His enterprise now occupies two floors at 123 Fulton Street, where 11 technicians are kept busy filling orders from all over the world. One of them, Max Burstein, a Russian, was a prisoner of war at Dachau for four years. He survived only because the Nazis discovered he could convert captured Russian typewriters into German. After the war Burstein changed the same machines back to Russian.

Although Tytell has become an outstanding authority on the printed word, he does not regard himself as a linguist. His interest in languages extends only to the characters, numerals, punctuation marks and accents of languages which belong on a typewriter keyboard. He calls himself a linguistic scientist.

Tytell's mechanical genius probably would surprise the high-school teacher who witnessed the beginning of his career. While she was absent from the classroom, Tytell, then 13, began experimenting on her typewriter with a pocketknife. By the time she returned, Tytell

was staring at a disorderly heap of parts. A repairman was called.

The third time this happened, the weary repairman said, "Look, kid, if you're going to keep pulling these things apart, you might as well learn to put them together."

At 15, Tytell was soliciting repair jobs after school. At 16, he shared a small office with the neighborhood plumber, and at 20 he established the business at 206 Broadway. Eight years later he moved to his present location.

Tytell's widely known willingness to perform any typewriter change has led him into strange avenues of business. One man recently asked for a machine with nothing but question marks. Furthermore, the question marks had to fall at different levels above and below the line. The customer refused to divulge the reason for his weird request.

Tytell also makes up typewriters for card players, with the diamond, club, spade and heart symbols on the keyboards. His oldest customer for this type of machine is a syndicated bridge columnist who finds he can now type what he once had to write in longhand.

That people with weird and difficult typewriter problems all seem to find their way to his shop no longer surprises Tytell. He has received several business letters from foreign countries addressed simply, "Tytell, the Typewriter Man, U.S.A." The letters reached him without delay.

A typewriter which has had its insides scrambled in an accident offers a challenge to Tytell. Recently he received 50 machines warped during a fire in a Tennessee warehouse.

One machine has already been rebuilt—and looks almost new. This sort of business is sent to Tytell by dealers aware of his belief that the typewriter can rarely be damaged beyond salvage.

Tytell is also currently receiving a stream of foreign typewriters liberated by GIs, including portables designed for the German general staff. But the bulk of his business is converting American machines into foreign keyboards. Because many clients speak no English, the business conferences are conducted mostly in pantomime over six huge albums of keyboard blueprints, for which he has companion type faces in his collection.

An Indian delegate to the U.N. need only gesticulate happily when he has located the right dialect of his native tongue: Tytell has them all — Devanagari, Bengali, Gurmukhi and others. An Egyptian customer must be equally precise, indicating whether he requires a machine to write Egyptian with a French accent or in English, with a curious adaptation of the pound symbol to replace the dollar sign.

This system of business accord via the sign language works with everyone except the Greeks. There is no Greek keyboard, although most other countries long ago standardized arrangements. "Consequently," Tytell explains, "every Greek has a different idea of how the letters should be scrambled on his machine."

Recently, however, Tytell stumbled upon a happy solution to the problem. After advertising for a typewriter apprentice, he discovered among the applicants a young man who could speak Greek. Now,

George Hadjapoulous frequently leaves his repair bench to deal with Greek clients.

Probably Tytell's best customers are members of the United Nations personnel. A guest book which he has kept since the U.N. convened at Lake Success reads like a roll call of the 55 nations represented. The French delegation is the top client, with Iraq not far behind. Only the Chinese failed to solve their problems at Tytell's.

Five members of the Chinese delegation conferred with Tytell to determine whether a Japanese machine on display in his shop could be converted into their language. Except for the characters, Chinese and Japanese machines are similar, although they are unlike standard typewriters. It was a conversion problem that Tytell would have enjoyed, but the cost of designing and casting 3,000 Chinese characters was prohibitive.

Tytell's most ambitious project

was his collaboration with the late blind ex-Senator Robert Owen, who developed a global alphabet which he believed could bring the world closer to oneness. Owen studied the more than 300 known phonetic alphabets and devised 37 symbols which he said would suffice to identify every word in any spoken language.

Unlike Esperanto, which is a language all its own, Owen's alphabet is a master alphabet which combines the key sounds of all alphabets. Tytell has already installed the first global keyboard on a typewriter and hopes soon to present a number of similar machines to the U.N.

Widespread adoption of the global alphabet might conceivably put Tytell out of business. However, his devotion to the cause is absolute, for there are probably few men with a truer understanding of what is meant when a language is called a barrier between peoples.

Trial and Error

TEMPLE HOUSTON, ONE of the great trial lawyers of his day, was once defending a murderer. He realized that the case was going badly and that the jury was against him. Yet there were no grounds upon which Houston could ask for a new trial.

Then, relying on his dramatic skill, he began to describe the incidents that led to the killing. Slowly he built up to the climax, all the while advancing stealthily

toward the jurymen. Nerves throughout the courtroom were ready to snap when he reached the fatal moment of the shooting. And at that moment he whipped out two guns and emptied them into the ceiling of the courtroom. The jury joined the panic-stricken mob in a mad stampede for the door.

Because the jurors had mingled with the crowd, Houston requested a new jury. And got it!

—From *How to Hold an Audience Without a Rope* by JOSH LEE, published by Ziff-Davis

